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ABSTRACT

Through a review of relevant literature, the paper illustrates how role expectations of males and females are modified with age and with the decrease of major family/work expectations. The discussion is based on the framework of sexual politics which is defined as power-structured relationships in which one group of persons is controlled by another. In marriage, power is determined by decision making, earning power, and bargaining and/or exchange. Several studies indicate that with progression of age, especially by late middle age and the approach to older age, sex-role emphasis diminishes. For example, older men feel easier about expressing traditional female qualities such as nurturing while females feel less guilty about being openly aggressive. Major changes which commonly occur with age and which contribute to diminishing sex roles are retirement from work, adjustment to reduced income, and the "empty nest." Within this context, sexual politics consist of a general abatement of sexual activity and the relatively new phenomenon of the older working woman. For single persons in older age, interpersonal relationships consist of a network of friends and some relatives. Literature indicates that close and enduring friendships are common between older females and that this ability to relate intimately to another woman helps maintain good morale. Literature also suggests that men are less apt to enter a comparable male/male friendship. The author concludes that the decline of sex-role defined behavior toward the latter half of life merits serious attention for the benefit of both older citizens and younger ones. (Author/KC)

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"Sex Roles and Sexual Politics In Later Life" [1.]

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Abstract

Contemporary sex-role studies generally fail to include a life-course dimension, particularly with respect to later life. Re-interpretation of some of the findings in areas of sex differences among older persons helps provide this missing perspective. Analysis reveals that sexual politics appear to be part of interpersonal relationships throughout life, although with decreased emphasis on sex-role determined behavior. The model that emerges is suggested as a possible example for youth to emulate.

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"Sex Roles and Sexual Politics in Later Life"

Contemporary sex-role literature clarifies to some extent the sexual politics aspect of human relationships. In so doing, it could be described as a major contribution to understanding of human interaction, as well as a catalyst for change in that interaction. An interesting comment can be made about these studies, however, and that is the general failure to include a "life-course" dimension to the concept of sex-roles. The result has been that little attention is given to the changing nature of sex-roles during the life-span, particularly with reference to later life.

This paper attempts to show how expectations of males and females, in their roles as men and women, are modified with age and with the decrease of their major family/work responsibilities. In order to do so, we examine aspects of interpersonal relationships that comprise sexual politics in later life, with emphasis on family relationships as the primary area of sex-role differentiation. Thus, the following discussion first touches briefly on sexual politics in general, which for all practical purposes in the literature pertains to the "young." This provides a background against which the situation for older men and women is brought into sharper focus. The model that emerges is suggested as a possible example for younger men and women to emulate in their efforts toward a more equitable balance of power between the sexes. Also, it is hoped that re-interpretation of some of the findings in areas of sex differences in later life will help provide a life-course perspective to sex-role analysis.

Power, Sex Roles, and Age

The concept of sexual politics has several important historical antecedents, but is often traced back to the work of Friedrich Engels (1884), and John Stuart Mill (1869), as two articulate statements of the interrelationship of sex-roles, the division of labor, and the political structure. A century later, the concept was more explicitly defined by Kate Millet (1970) not as an exclusive world of meetings, chairmen, and parties, but as "power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another," with obvious reference to the status of the sexes. It is often argued, also, that power can be viewed as a temporal balance (or imbalance) between individuals or groups of people. Used in this way, and with respect to individuals, the concept of sexual politics becomes a useful umbrella term covering the many theories that attempt to explain power relationships created by reason of gender, but that until recently, were rarely understood from a gender perspective. Put simply, sexual politics can be broadly interpreted to cover the myriad of explanations of interpersonal relations when those relations derive from social definitions of being male or female.

Sociologists tend to describe interpersonal relations in terms of role relationships, especially those of family, occupation, and the intersection of the two. Each of these areas of social interaction is influenced in varying degrees by a sexual component, but it is in the area of family life, and particularly in the marital system, that most research on interpersonal power has been centered. It might be useful to elaborate somewhac on this point as an illustration of one usual form of sexual politics.

The marriage relationship is frequently analyzed as a power interaction situation. Many studies are devoted to explaining the source of, or measuring,

the power of husband or wife over the other. The findings are varied, but in general, they revolve around such factors (among others), as 1) decision making (cf. Blood and Wolfe, 1960; Centers, et al, 1971), 2) earning power and/or control of valued resources (cf. Sprey, 1975; Rollins and Bahr, 1976; Safilios-Rothschild, 1976), 3) bargaining and/or exchange (cf. Scanzoni, 1972). Other factors such as relative competence, socio-cultural expectations, and the sex relationship itself - or the granting or denying of sex privilege - enter into the power relationship, and could be added to the list. Each of these factors could be considered as "political components" of the interaction, and in light of what is now known about sex-role socialization, each might be seen, also, as deriving in part from the fact of being male or female. Within this context, marital dynamics could be described as a basic form of sexual politics.

What is interesting to note here, and perhaps more than that, what demands attention, is the failure of conjugal-power analyses to give serious consideration to variation by age. However, age itself exerts a major influence on power-structured relationships. Fulfillment of role obligations and expectations by others of role fulfillment, change with progression of age so that by older age, role-status may be substantially different from that of earlier age periods. One could argue that with progression of age, and especially by late middle age and the approach to older age, there appears to be diminution of sex-role emphasis. For instance, Neugarten (1968,1969) suggests that older men feel easier about expressing more traditional "feminine" qualities such as nurturance, and conversely, older women feel less guilty about being more openly aggressive - a traditional masculine attribute. This tendency toward a neutralization of sex-role differentiation is echoed also in studies by Lowenthal, et al (1975), and Gutman (1977). Also, Ward (1979:137) suggests that men and women may become more psychologically alike as they age as an outcome of complex interactions between

age stratification and other aspects of the social structure. This might be explained in part by the fact that sex-role related behavior needed to accomplish major tasks of younger adulthood becomes increasingly less functional once these tasks are completed, so that less emphasis on being "male" or being "female" is necessary. Put in another way, age can be considered an ever present factor that changes the balance of interpersonal relationships so that the interaction becomes an ongoing process throughout the life span. Thus, older age, in combination with sex-role changes occuring with it, set the stage for sexual politics in later life. A brief overview of major sex-role changes that commonly occur with age might be helpful at this point.

The Social Context of Sex Roles In Later Life

As was suggested earlier, sex-role research tends to treat the latter part of life as an end point. Moderate interest in middle age is a fairly recent phenomenon, while sex-role analysis of those in older age is sparse. With respect to this point, studies of older men and women, for the most part, tend to present a picture of a category, or class, of persons apart from the mainstream, a group whose needs have come a social responsibility. It is as though those who make up approximately twelve percent of the population are outside of the social role structure rather than an integral part of it.

One might well ask why this should be so. The answers, in large part, involve several commonly known dramatic changes that occur at, or around, age 65, and which become a background for social interaction of those in the age category. It is difficult to attribute an order of importance to the changes that occur, but overall, one could describe them as occupational, economic, familial, and psychological. A brief summary of the high points of these changes are as follow.

1. Occupational

One critical event that takes place for most in later life is retirement from work. Since the early 1930's, age 65 has marked this point for men, and for increasing numbers of women, although recent laws raising the Mandatory Retirement Age may modify, somewhat, the traditional age of leaving work. Some studies describe the role of retiree in negative terms while other data present a happier and more positive view of the period. The evidence does not unequivocally support either assumption. Rather, it suggests that degree of satisfaction with retirement from work depends on a variety of factors with health and income being major determinants (Ward, 1979:226). What is clear, however, is that in industrial societies where work and social worth are irrevocably related, the transition from worker to retiree frequently means loss of social status (cf. Strauss, et al, 1976) and loss of a primary role identification. This is so particularly with men for whom "what one does," is "what one is."

It is commonly assumed that working women have less problem adjusting to retirement. However, with 41.7 percent of women aged 55-64 now working (1975 Handbook on Women Workers, Table 3), and with that number expected to increase during the period 1975-1990 (Campbell, 1979:259), it is fair to predict that retirement needs for women will require more serious attention. A fair number of studies already suggest the importance of work to women (cf. Streib and Schneider, 1971; Atchley, 1976), and increasing divorce rates in the age cohort, coupled with longer female life expectancy seem to underline the problem.

2. Economic

A second change for those in later life, and one that flows directly from the decision to retire, is that for most older persons, adjustment to reduced income is necessary. For many in the group, the new economic status may mean significant hardship since the elderly are over-represented among the nation's poor. Although the degree of hardship is difficult to evaluate by income statistics alone (Schulz, 1976), the fact of reduced economic security remains.

The loss of employment income tends to contribute to a lesser sense of self in a society where valued resources are equated with personal status. And again, this loss may be more difficult for men to accept since "male" is also defined as "breadwinner."

3. Familial

"Later years" in family life are usually associated with the postparental period, and statistics show that a married couple can look forward to an "empty nest" stage of approximately 13 years, as compared to two years at the turn of the century (Glick, 1977). Also, recent figures show that there are 4.3 million couples 65 years old or older in the United States, (some in a remarriage rather than a first marriage), a fact that suggests a preference for marriage among older persons (Glick, 1979). Nonetheless, marital ties in later life are largely determined by biological factors - that is, by health, or the lack of it, and death, as shown in Table 1. The figures indicate

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Table 1

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the well known but still important phenomenon of the disproportionate access of older men to a marital relationship. In support of this fact, Glick notes (1979:303) that there were five times as many widows as widowers among the elderly in 1976; up from four times as many in 1970. It could be argued then that given the loss of their traditional primary roles of mother and wife, changes in familial status as one grows older has more serious consequences for women.

4. Psychological

One can easily surmise from the comments above that occupational, economic, and familial changes for the elderly are strongly interrelated and interdependent variables that bear direct relationship to psychological well-being. This last

has been a focus of substantial research interest, and has produced a variety of socio-psychological theories of aging including the idea of "disengagement," and several developmental themes. It would seem, however, that the major changes discussed that occur with age tend to support theories dealing with role changes as explanation of an older person's psychological state. These theories revolve, either directly or indirectly, around a basic symbolic-interactionist assumption that one's perception of oneself takes on shades of one's perception of how others see him/her. Ward (1979:141) summarizes the role approach to explaining psychological change in older age by saying,

> "Identity and self emerge from interactions with others, as they validate particular identities, and the self lends consistency by directing behavior. Social roles provide access to particular social and symbolic worlds. To the extent that roles change with age, the self is vulnerable to change. Thus, age stratification in concert with symbolic interactions are the ultimate sources of developmental psychological change."

Thus, an older individual's perception of self and of age peers reflect a loss of worth by virtue of socially imposed role transitions, each of which generally mean lesser societal status. As a consequence, intimate and/or meaningful relationships may become more difficult to maintain since it is a common psychological belief that such relationships depend on feelings of worth and respect for oneself and for the other.

These major changes that take place with age form a social and psychological milieu within which older men and women order their interaction. What, then, of sexual politics at this age?

Sex Roles in Later Life

For the purpose of analysis, it might be well to examine the sexual politics aspects of older couples first, and single persons next.

1. Older Couples

It is obvious that the social world of older citizens involves far fewer "significant others" than the every day setting of younger people. For the older individual who is married, the marital relationship can be critical insofar as life satisfaction is concerned. Past studies state that on the whole, older couples perceive their marriages as fairly happy, although couples of lower socio-economic status report less satisfaction (Stinnett, et al, 1972). Nonetheless, the dynamics of the relationship are subtle, and given social changes over time, may differ significantly from early married life.

To begin with, there have been gradual changes in sexual activity over time, so that there is a considerable difference between sex life at age 65 and over, and years earlier. Reliable information about sexual behavior of aging couples was difficult to obtain until Masters' and Johnson's research (1966) gave impetus to more rigorous investigation of sex behavior in later life. The moderate number of studies that followed tended to emphasize a "little change" theme, as contrasted to earlier prevailing views of "little or no sexual activity" for older men and women. More recent studies relate that in older age, 1) there is general abatement of the sex drive, 2) there is less frequent sexual activity, 3) many couples find sexual pleasure in physical contact short of coitus, and 4) where cessation occurs, most women blame their partners, while most men blame themselves (cf. Pfeiffer, et al, 1972).

A second major change, and one whose full impact cannot yet be measured, is the newer pattern of older women working. One outcome that has already been noticed is that women working in the "empty nest" stage seems to reduce interaction between parents and offspring. The result is a tendency for segregation of one generation from the next, so that the older couple never really becomes part of an interacting intergenerational family. Rather, they exist as a sub-

nuclear unit (Bouvier, et al, 1975).

The significant number of older women in the labor force may create another change in traditional husband/wife relationships. There is some evidence that suggests that at retirement, women, more than men, miss their jobs and colleagues (Atchley, 1976). Also, Barfield and Morgan (1978) note an increasing frequency of husbands planning early retirement, with wives wanting to delay their own retirement.

One other comment can be made with respect to the effects of older working wives. Their earnings while at work, and their Social Security benefits at retirement, mean a substantial contribution to couples' income. At the same time, the ability to contribute financially means greater independence - a departture from the traditional wife's status.

Thus, two crucial components of the traditional definition of the male role, those of earning power and sexual power, are highly modified in older age. One could expect that some change in the balance of sexual politics would ensue and, in fact, studies reveal that some change does occur, particularly in middle and upper-middle class couples. These findings generally agree that marriages of older couples are more egalitarian with respect to relative power of husbands and wives, and that overall, there is a tendency toward neutralization of sex-role determined behavior (cf. Dressler, 1973; Kerckhoff, 1966). Studies of working class marriages, which are generally described as less egalitarian over time, are not as clear. Some suggest that in these marriages, husbands maintain dominance by virtue of tradition (e.g. Adams, 1975), while others note that husbands lose authority, mostly because of loss of earning power (e.g. Blood and Wolfe, 1960).

The issue of power in older couple relationships is addressed from time to time in the literature, but the issue is never raised with reference to older

single persons. Within the context of analysis of sex-role determined behavior in later life, however, status of the single person is of interest.

2. The Older Single Person and Sexual Politics

The combination of single, older, and sexual politics may appear to be an unusual combination, if not an impossible one. Nonetheless, sex and gender continue to influence relationships throughout life, albeit in different ways. Of the population in the United States age 65 and over, approximately 8 percent of both men and women have never married. Somewhat more than 3 percent are separated or divorced, again with no great differentiation between men and women. The largest number of older persons are single by virtue of being widowed, and in 1976, widows numbered approximately 7.20 million, and widowers approximately 1.37 million (Glick, 1979). The potential for sexual politics in relationships of older single persons would thus appear to be with reference to women primarily.

The world of intimate interpersonal relations in later life for single people is most often reduced to an interaction network of friends and some relatives, and given the preponderance of older women, could be said to center significantly on female/female relationships. If one takes into consideration the earlier statement that sexual politics explains a wide range of interpersonal relations when those relations derive from social definition of being male or female, then it is easier to understand that sexual politics may appear, also, in the interaction of two people of the same sex. For example, the literature tells us that close and enduring friendships are common between females, and that this ability to relate intimately to another woman as a confidante helps maintain good morale in older single women (Lowenthal and Haven, 1968). The same literature suggests that men are less apt to enter a comparable male/male friendship. The sex differentiation in propensity to enter friendship roles could be interpreted as a product of earlier sex-role socialization.

Single elderly represent a significant number of the population of older persons. It might help to understand their particular needs and problems if there were a better understanding of the degree to which sex-role socialization inhibits or encourages more satisfactory daily life for them.

Toward a More Equal Balance of Power Between the Sexes

The decline of sex-role defined behavior toward the latter half of life is a factor that merits more serious attention for the benefit of both older citizens and younger ones. At present, there is a modal patterning to men's lives of education → work → leisure (retirement) as compared to the greater role diversity of women's lives. It has been suggested (Riley, 1978) that interspersing education, work, and leisure over the life course (e.g. educational opportunities for all ages, no mandatory retirement age, pension plans for mid-career, sabbatical leaves in all occupations, shorter work week, and flexible work hours) would help emphasize the older years as an integral and meaningful part of the whole life span, rather than the residual category they seem to be. This approach de-emphasizes life long behavior defined by sex by permitting entry and re-entry into major role statuses at any age, thus providing life long options. A secondary (and paradoxical) effect might be that the decreased importance of sexual politics as seen in later life could become a model for interpersonal relations among younger people.

TABLE 1. Marital Status of Men and Women, Aged 65 and Over

(March 1976, Percentage Distribution)

	Men		Women	
Status	Ages 65-74	Ages 75 and over	Ages 65-74	Ages 75 and over
Single	4.2	4.9	5.9	6.0
Married	81.3	66.7	46.4	21.4
Separated	2.5	2.9	2.2	1.2
Widowed	8.9	23.5	42.0	69.7
Divorced	3.1	2.0	3.5	1.7

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, no. 306, "Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1976", Table 1, P.9, 1977.

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